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ABSTRACT

A parent-child reading project was implemented in an urban child-parent center classroom for 4-year-olds. Although the children represented a variety of ethnic and cultural groups, they all came from families of limited economic resources. The purposes of this project were to emphasize the importance of shared storybook experiences at home and at school, and to provide opportunities for parents and children to increase the frequency of shared storybook experiences. Planning the project involved establishing a classroom lending library and scheduling times for parents to come to share books with their children in the classroom. The outcomes that resulted from establishing the lending library were: parents assisting their children in returning and checking out books; parents taking the initiative to sew book bags and illustrate them; and parents donating books. Children's interest in reading, their listening skills, and their vocabulary increased as a result of parents reading aloud to them in class. Monologue, Echo Reading, and Dialogue were the three distinct reading styles identified from analyzing videotapes of parent read-alouds. Each of these approaches was effective in keeping children engaged in the storybook experience. Results indicate that parent-child reading programs can encourage partnerships between parents and teachers to enhance the literacy development of their children. (BAC)

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Let's Read Together: Parents and Children in the Preschool Classroom[1]

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Paper presented at the Chicago Metro Association for the Education of Young Children Conference: "Focus on Feelings", (Chicago, IL, February 3-5, 1994)

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Let's Read Together: Parents and Children in the Preschool Classroom[1]

This article describes a successful year-long parent-child reading program that was implemented in Linda's classroom for four-year-olds in an urban child-parent center. Children in her classroom represented a variety of ethnic and cultural groups; however, all came from families of limited economic resources. The parent-child reading program was composed of two parts: a lending library and in-classroom storybook reading by parents.

Parents are their children's first and longest teachers. They are with their children throughout their early learning experiences and accompany them as they begin to explore the world. Parents' role in their children's acquisition of language has been long recognized. Recent research is beginning to document the important role played by parents in introducing their children to literacy (Taylor, 1983; Teale, 1986; Whitehurst, Payne and Angell, 1994). The benefits of storybook experiences for young children are many. Children's early storybook experiences provide opportunities for children to develop language, to learn about properties of written language, to develop socialization skills, and to benefit from adults' cultural knowledge and mediation.

Parents also benefit from these storybook experiences. Sharing books with children provides parents with a time of closeness and a time of building shared memories. It is often a

time of relaxation when parents and children pause in their busy schedules to focus on a story or piece of non-fiction. Storybook sharing is a way of transmitting ideas, attitudes, and values between parents and children. This is also a time parents can learn of their children's ideas and responses to what is read. Parents can learn what their children are thinking and over time can see their children grow and develop in their thinking and communication skills.

Project Purposes

The purposes of this parent-child reading project were to emphasize the importance of shared storybook experiences at home and at school and to provide opportunities for parents and children to increase the frequency of shared storybook experiences. The urban population served by this parent-child center is characterized by lower levels of literacy and school standardized achievement scores that are below the national mean. Due to these characteristics we wanted to encourage a positive orientation to literacy early in these children's lives while encouraging their parents to become involved in sharing their own literacy.

Initial Planning

With the support of a grant from the Rochelle Lee Foundation in Chicago, plans were made to establish a classroom lending library and to schedule times in the preschool classroom for parents to come to share books with their children in the classroom.

Linda selected and arranged a classroom library of over 100 titles. Titles were selected based on children's interests and author preferences, including the **Clifford** series, **Curious George** books, Mercer Mayer's **Little Critter** books, and **Sesame Street** books. Many Spanish-English storybooks were also included.

After the classroom library was in place, Linda met with parents while the children were involved in outside activities. She described to parents the ways in which she would focus on storybooks in the classroom: a daily, 20-minute read aloud session accompanied by finger plays, poetry, and creative dramatics. She invited parents to come to her classroom each day fifteen minutes before the end of the session to read to their children and to assist her in checking out books for their children to take home. While there was no time limit on the book loan, children were initially allowed to take only one book home at a time, and they were required to return each book before they could check out another book.

Children assembled "bookworms" out of circles of construction paper which recorded the number of books they had read. [See figure 1]

Each bookworm was made from six circles of the same color of paper. The first circle contained the face and on each of the five remaining circles was the name of the book, the date it was read, the name of the person who read it to the child, and the child's name. Children

were each given a special sticker to place on each circle. As children checked in their books, additional work on their bookworms was completed. When a bookworm was completed, it was taken home and a new bookworm was started.

Program Outcomes

Lending Library. All 17 of the children and their parents participated in the lending library. Many parents came to the classroom daily to assist their children in returning and checking out books. On their own initiative several parents assumed leadership in sewing book bags (denim with plastic lining) for each child in the room. Parents used fabric paint to decorate and personalize the outside of the bag. Frequently, mothers would illustrate a picture from one of their child's favorite books.

When it was determined that several parents could not read, and thus were not frequently using the lending library or reading to their children at home, Linda and her aides made a special effort to read to those children individually during independent activity times, and constructed the reading bookworms with them.

At the end of the year, one parent celebrated her daughter's completion of eight bookworms (40 books) by baking her a cake with a rainbow colored bookworm on it and bringing the cake to school to share with the class. Both the mom and her daughter were beaming with joy and pride! Their willingness to share their happiness helped the whole class celebrate in the fun of reading.

Another outcome of this lending library was the unsolicited donation of books by parents. Both new and recycled books were donated to the classroom library. Linda put a special sticker in the front of each donated book, identifying its donor and their child. Children were observed proudly showing the books to each other and reading the donor stickers.

Parent Read Alouds. Parents seemed to enjoy the opportunity to come and read storybooks. Some parents came every day. Eighty percent of the parents were frequent readers. Often, at the beginning of the class children would announce that their mom, dad or aunt would be coming later to read. Children would seem to sense when it was almost time for the parent read aloud. They would select their favorite book(s), clutch them under their arms and wait for the first adult or their special adult to walk in the door, and would then besiege them with a "read to me" request.

Linda also observed increases in children's interest in reading--reading books to themselves as well as having others read to them. Now children were more likely to go to the library corner during independent work time. On the days when only a couple of parents were able to attend the shared reading time, some children went to the library corner and began reading favorite storybooks to each other!

Children's listening skills increased and were noticeable during the class' storytimes. Even the distractions from the shared open classroom were now less likely to interfere with the

children's attentiveness during storytime. Children's vocabulary increased and reflected words/concepts found in their storybooks. English-speaking children were observed listening in on Spanish-speaking parents' read alouds and learned a few words in Spanish. Non-English speaking children were also observed listening in on English-speaking parents' read alouds, and resulting in their increased English vocabulary.

Parents' Reading Styles

As parents shared books with the children, we noticed that there were three distinct reading styles which effectively engaged the children in storybooks. These conclusions were reached from analyzing videotapes of the parent read alouds.

Monologue. In this reading style parents read the story while children listened. There was no verbal participation or response on the part of the children; however, non-verbal behaviors indicated that the children were still engaged in the story. The children's eyes followed the story through illustrations, and often facial expression indicated a response to the content of the story being read. Parents who were successful in this reading style appeared to monitor their child's gaze and could tell whether the child was involved in listening to the story. Often the parent would point to a part of the illustration or the print as a way of directing the child's attention.

Echo Reading. This reading style is characterized by the parent reading and then pausing for the child to echo what

had just been read. While this reading style was present in only one mother-daughter dyad, it is included here as a separate style due to its distinctiveness. When we saw this in a classroom, it appeared to be the reading style used at home since the mother and daughter seemed to be well-established in this type of shared reading. When this reading style occurred the mother and daughter were each holding a copy of the same book. The mother first pointed to the start of the text. She seemed to be aware of the length of the phrase that her daughter could successfully repeat. When the child erred in making the repetition or hesitated in responding, the mother repeated the phrase or word and then waited for her daughter's response. Non-verbal behavior on the part of the daughter indicated a high level of interest in this type of shared reading (smiles, directed tracking of the print as her mother pointed to the text). She stood close to her mother, snuggling near her side as they both held their books. As the shared reading continued, the mother lowered her copy of the book and looked on the copy of the book that her daughter was holding. It was a relatively long text, and she (the daughter) persisted in her echo responses until the entire text was read.

Dialogue. The third style of reading was dialogic in nature. In this style, parents read the text in segments and elicited responses from the children in a variety of ways. Sometimes parents would ask questions prior to beginning to read the book, asking questions about the title or the cover illustration. Parents would also pause after reading a sentence

or two and ask questions about the story action or illustration. Some questions asked for recall of story events; others asked children to predict upcoming events. Sometimes parents would simply pause after reading a segment of text. The children appeared to interpret this pause as an indication of "their turn" and would respond with comments or questions related to the story line or illustrations. Parents also pointed frequently to the text and illustrations, which kept the children focused on the book. Intonational differences by parents when reading the text also kept children interested in the story.

Each of these three styles of reading were effective in keeping the children engaged in the storybook experience. Further study of parents' reading styles over time and with a variety of text types would be valuable in describing how children's early storybook experiences enhance their literacy development.

Summary

This parent-child reading program was successful and was continued in the following school year. The creation of a classroom lending library increased the availability of books to children which could be enjoyed at home. These books were familiar to the children since they were also books read by their classroom teachers. By having parents come to school to read in the classroom, it illustrated the value of reading to the children. It also indicated the parents' value of reading and learning to their children. When children read with their

parents or several children reading with one parent, children had the opportunity for closer book interaction and more individualized attention than they would have at the class' whole group storytime. Children could see the illustrations better, which may enhance story comprehension. The in-class reading times provided a way parents could share in the classroom activities in an informal way. Parents in this program needed no training to participate. They were able to interact effectively with children using a variety of interaction styles. Linda's classroom was a comfortable environment which warmly welcomed each parent. Through programs such as Linda's parents and teachers can begin to form partnerships that enhance the literacy development of their children.

Notes

[1]Videotaping and analysis of the parent reading sessions as well as part of the lending library were supported by a grant from the Committee on Organized Research, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, IL. The lending library was established with support from the Rochelle Lee Foundation, Chicago, Illinois.

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